DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 516 CS 216 161

AUTHOR McLaughlin, Margaret
TITLE Basic Writers Three Years Later: Their Problems and Their Priorities.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Black Students; Comparative Analysis; *English Instruction; Higher Education; Longitudinal Studies; Remedial Instruction; *Remedial Programs; Student Motivation; White Students; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; *Basic Writers

ABSTRACT

An in-process longitudinal study examined what happened to remedial readers and writers placed into college-level remedial English classes after they left the remedial program. Subjects were 61 students (40 African Americans and 21 Caucasians) who had randomly been placed into two remedial English classes. Data included interviews with the students, their teachers, and analyses of their writings and of their academic transcripts. By the fourth college year, only 30% of the African Americans and 70% of the Caucasians are still enrolled in college. A black female and a white female, although they had nearly identical very low SAT verbal scores, had very different levels of academic success--despite a strong writing voice and determination, the black female had completed only 39 credit hours in seven quarters and did not return to the university, while the white female is a senior and has been on academic probation only once. A similar discrepancy is found when comparing the academic experiences of "Kevin" and "Regina." Both are near graduation, but Kevin sailed through all 12 quarters, while Regina was on academic probation for three quarters, and was excluded from enrolling the following quarter. She was able to re-enroll but had to enroll in summer school and repeatedly take exit exams to be eligible for graduation. The academic experiences of these four students reveal little correlation between their verbal SAT scores or their motivation to succeed and their ability to exit remedial English classes. (RS)

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Basic Writers Three Years Later: Their Problems and Their Priorities

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It is widely known that college-level remedial English classes are heavily populated by African American students and that these students have a high attrition rate in four year programs. A recently published national study, "the most comprehensive assessment of the African-American post-secondary educational experience yet produced," reports that African American students are placed in college remedial classes at a much higher rate than white students (30% to 7%), yet they receive only 6% of all bachelors' degrees granted each year (Gray, 1997, p. 3-a). Data from an in-progress longitudinal study of remedial readers and writers that we are conducting at our university suggest some causes for this wide discrepancy in academic success.

THE STUDY

In the fall of 1993, 40% of the 2,804 entering freshmen at our university were placed in remedial classes. In an attempt to discover what impact remedial instruction has on students academic careers, we decided to launch a longitudinal study of the 61 students who had been randomly placed in the two remedial English classes we were teaching that quarter. When we began the study, we had one major research question: "What Happens To High-Risk Students After Remedial English?" Among the related

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(1. How many of these students will graduate and in how long a time period?

(2. Are there correlations between the attrition rate and the students' first quarter work in remedial English?

(3. Will African American dialect interfere with success in subsequent college courses?

METHODOLOGY:

For the past four years, we have been following the academic progress of the 61 students enrolled in those two developmental classes through personal interviews with them and with their instructors in subsequent English classes as well as through analyses of their writings and of their academic transcripts. The subjects of this study are quite representative of developmental students at our university: virtually all are recent high school graduates; two thirds are African American; and SAT scores range from a low of 220 to a high of 410. Few have read a whole book, and their writing backgrounds are often limited to high school research papers. When we asked our students about their high school backgrounds, we heard variations of the following answer:.ls1

> When I came to college I was totally blank because the only thing we did was to go to the library, we may have to write on somebody, we go to the library and copy that out of the encyclopedia. And I passed. I came up with A's. And then when I came to college, I didn't think they would say anything about grammar and things like that, so I just wrote what I was thinking about, you know.

The student then went on to talk about her high school English teacher:

> She wasn't teaching me anything. We did things like read a book, answer questions, maybe we would write a summary from the story. But it wasn't like she was checking for grammar and stuff like that. I went back and told her, and I told some of my friends in high scho,"Prepare your own self; do not wait on her to teach you," but she say there's only so much we can do because of what the board y she can do, and I don't think that is right, because even though I was going to a public schoool, I des equarter. When we embarked on the study, we had one major research question: What happensrved to learn everything I
> needed to learn in case if I want to go to college. Not saying I have to--'cause everybody don't want to go, but if I want to, I should have had the opportunity to know it, you know.

This student's reply to our question about high school background also illustrates many of our developmental students' high motivation for academic success. Most are first generation college students who perceive a college degree as a ticket to a better economic life.

Our subjects are now in their fourth college year, and some tentative answers are beginning to emerge to our research questions. We have these facts for the question, "How many of these students will graduate and in how long a time period?" Of the original 61 students, 29 are enrolled for the 1997 winter quarter--10 are classified as seniors; 18 as juniors, and one is still a sophomore. Handout #2 shows the academic progress of each of the 61 students. Of the 61 students, 40 are African American and 21 are Caucasian. 12 of the African Americans are still enrolled--a 30% percent retention rate--and 15 of the 21 white students--a 70% retention rate. These lopsided retention figures--70% to 30%--are disturbing and somewhat puzzling, for we did not perceive such a discrepancy in ability or desire to

persist during their first academic quarter. When we looked at when specific students had left school, we realized that all of the white students had left within two years, but three or more African American students continue to drop by the wayside every quarter.

In an attempt to find out just what is happening to our African American students, we used two of our research questions, "Are there correlations between the attrition rate and the students' first quarter writing abilities?" and "Will African American dialect interfere with success in subsequent classes?" to probe the writings and experiences of three black/white student pairs who have similar SAT verbal scores: Laura (white female) and ChaCha(black female) who have scores below 250; Regina (black female) and Kevin (white male) with scores in the vicinity of 300; and Kenneth (black male) and Jennifer (white female) with identical scores of 360.

To see if we could find any correlation between the attrition rate and the students' first quarter writing abilities, we first looked at the autobiographical essays the students had written over a period of several weeks near the beginning of their first college quarter. The following introductory paragraphs that Laura and ChaCha wrote for their autobiographies reveal their inexperience with expressing their ideas in writing.

INTRODUCTION TO LAURA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY (October, 1993):

> One thing that I learned the most in tenth grade is what I call racism. During the year I learned that not all races get along. This was a change in my life because in junior high all races bonded together. Since I went through this awful experience I learned that racism is not only in schools but it is all around you. Eve y day you hear on the news about racism. I learned that the color of someones skin does not mean anything.

INTRODUCTION TO ChaCha'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY (October, 1993):

> I would like to talk about the most alluring time of my life. It all commence to fall apart while I was in the 11th grade. I had never been in trouble ever since this time. I have always had older comrades because I always thought they knew a little more than I did. My best friend Valerie was a below average student that scarcely passed her classes. After she graduated, she attended Fort Valley for at least a year or two. She had changed a lot after she had went to school but she begun to hang around the wrong crowd.

Even these brief paragraphs reveal that neither Laura nor ChaCha is in control of the language. Both have numerous errors of various types, and both have incoherent paragraphs that signal difficulties with reading comprehension. ChaCha's lack of focus and misuse of verb forms, however, we do not find in Laura's writing.

We then looked at the exit essays Laura and ChaCha wrote. Exit essays are final exams; they are in-class impromptu writings which are evaluated by two English faculty other than students' own instructors. The exit essays determine whether a student passes or fails the course. The students are given five topics and two hours to produce an essay the readers believe would merit at least a C grade in Freshman English I. Here are the introductory paragraphs Laura and ChaCha wrote:

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INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH for LAURA'S EXIT ESSAY:

TOPIC: Write an essay about an experience that has happened to you since you have been at GSU that has changed you. Describe both the experience and its effect.

> Now that I am in college, I will face many different experiences. Such as, playing on a varsity sport, dorm life, and meeting new friends. I have enjoyed playing soccer since I was six years old, so I decided to continue playing in college. When I first arrived at GSU on August 19, 1993, I did not know what to suspect because I had never been in a dorm before, and I did not know anyone on the soccer team.

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH for CHA CHA'S EXIT ESSAY (November, 1993):

TOPIC: Yo! Rap music seems to be here to stay. Is it an important new form of musial expression or just noise? Write an essay explaining your answer with specific examples and concrete details.

> Some rap is very loud and very obscure to understand. I often misinterpret the message that the rappers are trying to stress or what they are trying to get the young kids to perceive. Most of the rap is degrading to woman and some rap provide a good message for the teenagers.

Some of the obvious problems in the paragraphs written early in the quarter we don't find in these later paragraphs: Laura's fragment and inappropriate choice of the word "suspect" really stands out more than ChaCha's noun and verb ending errors. What is perhaps more noticeable, however, is their choice of topics. Laura is playing it safe writing about her own experiences, but objectively and from a distance. ChaCha, however, chooses to analyze the effect of rap: "most of the rap is degrading to woman" but "some rap provides a good message for teenagers." These are perceptive insights in a much more focused introduction

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than we saw in her autobiography.

Both Laura and ChaCha had to take a second quarter of Developmental English, and it was after this second quarter that the academic paths of these two young women began to diverge. Laura exited DS English at the end of the second quarter, got a B in Freshman English I, a D in Freshman English II, re-enrolled the following quarter, and earned the necessary C. She is now a senior majoring in Resort and Commercial Recreation, and although she has received a number of D's and F's in core curriculum courses, she has been on academic probation only once. She has completed 182 of the 190 hours needed to graduate, and she should graduate next month if she can pass the Regents' Reading Exam which the state of Georgia has mandated that students must pass before they can receive a college diploma from a state-supported school. Lisa has sat for the Reading Exam six times and taken an Intensive Review Course three times, but she has not yet been able to pass the test.

ChaCha's story, however, is quite different. Unlike Laura, she did not exit her second remedial course, and she became increasingly frustrated. Near the end of the quarter she "blew up" after receiving yet another failing paper and even threatened her instructor. In an interview with that instructor the following quarter, we asked what she remembered about ChaCha:

ANSWER: She was <u>very</u> determined--single most prominent characteristic--she was determined to get out of Developmental English . . . She was a hard worker; she did everything; she only missed one class, did workbook exercises, everything.

Question: What would you say is her biggest strength as a writer?

Answer: Her ability to phrase an idea in an original way--using some sort of metaphor or image, you know, about what something was like. . .it was as though she really was trying to get the words to make meaning, to match her meaning, and it would be very original and have a lot of strength to it, so every now and then there would be those kinds of sentences that were really very lovely and very expressive.

Question: Would you predict that she will graduate from college?

Answer: If determination will do it, she will. . . .But something I found most disturbing about her, though more on a personal level, was that I never did know when she would explode.

It is little wonder that ChaCha was on the verge of exploding during her second quarter. Her 3 classes--Reading, English, Math--were all Developmental Studies repeats, and in spite of her hard work and determination, she did not pass any of the three.

When we interviewed her third quarter English instructor and asked what she remembered about ChaCha, she said: "I remember that she kept her head down on her desk a lot. At first, I thought that she was tuning me out. And then I realized that she was paralyzed by stress. I don't know that I've seen many students as stessed out as ChaCha."

Question: How did you recognize that?

Answer: Because she would sit up and look at me and I could tell that she had been listening to everything that was going on in class, but it helped her to keep her head down. She could hear better with her head down because she was in such a state.

Question: What would you say is her biggest strength as a writer?

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Answer: She had a voice. She knew who she was, and she could write, and the voice would come through as she wrote.

Question: And what would you say was her biggest weakness as a writer?

Answer: Conventions, dealing with conventions, standard written English.

Question: Do you predict that she will be able to graduate?

Answer: I don't know. I just don't know. Her determination will serve her well. She has that wonderful determination.

Both of Cha Cha's instructors note her strong writing voice and her determination to succeed, and her determination did serve her well--for a while. She was finally able to pass all three developmental subjects, and she did well the first quarter she took regular classes, earning a B in Freshman English, a C in College Algebra, and a C in Spanish. Her determination began to wane, however, and the next quarter her GPA was a 1.5, then the next quarter, a 1.3, and finally a .50. At the end of her seventh quarter, she did not return to the university. She had successfully completed only 39 credit hours--fewer than 6 hours per quarter. We might think ChaCha's academic story inevitable given her very low SAT verbal score (230) and inadequate writing skills when she entered college if it were not that Laura's potential for academic success--SAT verbal score (240) and inadequate writing skills--seems so very similar.

When we turned our attention to Kevin and Regina, we found a similar discrepancy in academic experiences. Kevin and Regina are now juniors. Kevin is majoring in Communication Arts and

Broadcasting; he has completed 177 credit hours and has a 2.7 GPA. By taking 13 credit hours this quarter, Kevin will graduate next month, December, 1977. Regina is majoring in Criminal Justice, and she has completed 175 quarter hours with a 2.0 GPA. She will do her internship for her Criminal Justice degree next quarter and will be eligible to graduate in March, 1998. As similar as their college careers may sound, Regina's academic road has been much more rocky.

Kevin has sailed straight through all twelve quarters. He exited Developmental English the first quarter, has never been on academic probation, has had only one D grade, and has gone to summer school only once. Kevin stumbled only one time in his stride toward graduation: he did not pass his first exit essay. He was eligible, however, to write a second essay, which he did pass. Neither did Regina pass the first exit essay, and she too was eligible for a second attempt, but -unlike Kevin--she did not pass--which made her next two years very different from Kevin's. Let's look at their first quarter writings to see if we can find any foreshadowing of what is to come:

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH--Kevin's autobiography:

> Entering my high school years I was surrounded by temptations. I came to Atlanta when I was thirteen. Being a young boy from Indiana I did not know what to expect. From the age of thirteen to the age of eighteen I encountered many life changing experiences. Three major incidents help result in who I am: Getting my hair cut, quitting smoking, and when Brandi broke up with me.

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INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH --Regina's autobiography

> Coming from a single parent home there are many sacrifices. My family are making sacrifices now to send me to college. I have two sisters, a brother, and a mother. They are giving up alot of things for me. My mother had planned on retiring from her job this year. She had to put it off, because my father is not around. For a while she has been taking care of us by herself. She is a very independent woman. She has never asked anyone for a handout. In high school I worked and that made things a little easier for her, because she didn't have to worry about me. She told me I didn't need to work the first semester of college, just concentrate on my education. She tries to send me money, on the weeks that she don't have to pay bills. That could be money that she could take the other kids out and get them something nice. I went home last week, because I was broke. Even though she didn't have the cash to spare. We went out shopping for groceries. She bought me more things than I really needed. The kids thought I was getting special treatment, but I wasn't. These were things I deserved for trying to better myself.

What is immediately noticeable is the difference in length and in the desire to communicate. Kevin is very restrained in what he's willing to tell us about his "life changing" experiences and what he does tell, he's forcing into a formula--a brief background statement before a three-pronged thesis. Regina, on the other hand, is writing in a stream of consciousness style about the people and events most meaningful to her. Neither student has many errors--Regina a few more than Kevin but then she has given us a much lengthier text. When we look at their exit essays, we see the same types of differences:

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH FOR REGINA'S EXIT ESSAY (November 1993):

TOPIC: How do you account for the popularity of one of your favorite entertainers?

Many entertainers are popular for numbers of reasons. They are popularity to me is accounted by their looks, their actions, and their talents. Popularity is very important to an entertainer's life. The entertainer I love the most is Michael Jackson. Michael Jackson popularity started as a young child, while performing with his older brothers. Michael had a characteristic that made him seem different from his brothers, and other entertainers. He had an innocent attitude that took America by surprise.

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH FOR KEVIN'S EXIT ESSAY (November 1993)

TOPIC: Our society is today faced with problems of racial prejudice, unemployment, high crime, drugs, and the formation of teenage gangs. Write an essay telling how any ONE of these problems has affected you or someone you know.

Drugs are a big problem in America's society today. People are arrested or killed by drugs every day. I have been around drugs through out my teenage years. Not only until last year did drugs have an effect on my life.

The great difference in length and writing style that we noted in their autobiographies we also find here. Kevin's writing is not nearly as fluent as Regina's, and several of his word choices are awkward or inappropriate. Regina's errors jump out more at the reader (for example--they are for there), but her last sentence has a clarity that we don't often find in the writings of developmental students. Kevin's essay passed; Regina's did not, and so she had to take a second quarter of Developmental English.

When we asked Regina's second developmental English instructor what she remembered about Regina, she replied,

ANSWER: She was diligent. She came in with many grammatical problems that tend to go along with the Black English. And she worked hard to clear them up, but it was just not successful. It's hard, you know, to take a student who has grown up with bad speech, and then they put it into the writing, and then they don't recognize that it's incorrect.

Only 24 of our 61 students required a second quarter of Developmental English, and of those 24, only 7 did not exit at the end of the second quarter and were required to take a third quarter. Those 7 were all African American and included both ChaCha and Regina; Regina is the only one of the seven still enrolled in school.

Regina did finally exit DS English at the end of her third quarter. She was on probation for three quarters; then on suspension, and the following quarter, excluded from enrolling. While on exclusion, she did not go home but stayed in town and worked as a cashier at WalMart. She then enrolled for the summer quarter and took only one course, Art, and got a B. That B enabled her to enroll as a probationary student fall quarter. She has not again been on probation, but she did have difficulty passing the Regents' Writing Exam and had to take an Intensive Review Course two times and received a D the third time. The Board of Regents mandates that all students write a "competent" essay and pass a standardized reading test before they can graduate from a state-supported college or university. Regina passed the reading test on her first attempt, but she failed the writing test three times. After three unsuccessful attempts at the Regents, students are required to enroll in a non-credit review course and to take the test every quarter until they do pass it. Regina made three attempts to pass the writing test and then three more attempts while enrolled in the Intensive

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Review Course. During the the sixth quarter and the sixth attempt, she did finally pass. Kevin passed both the Regents' Reading and Writing exams on the first attempt.

Regina has gone to summer school three times and is currently taking 20 hours of course work and working two jobs and plans once again go to summer school because she is determined to graduate in December 1997. And, on the basis of his steady progress, it looks as though Kevin will also graduate in December, but his path has been much straighter and smoother than Regina's just as Jennifer's has been when compared with Kenneth's.

The academic experiences of these four students reveal little correlation between their Verbal SAT scores or their motivation to succeed and their ability to exit remedial English classes. We fear that the experiences of ChaCha and Rowena are representative of many African American students who enter the academy and encounter Anglocentric cultural and linguistic expectations.